DAZED

Tetsumi Kudo's X-rated cages that shocked the art world

We look back on the life and work of a true art rebel who has influenced everyone from the Chapman brothers to Mike Kelley

Text **Francesca Gavin**

When people use the word "outsider" about an artist, the image it conjures up is of someone outside of the gallery system, making work with a sense of compulsion and hidden obsession. Yet the late, legendary Tetsumi Kudo had his own completely unique visual vocabulary and approach to art. He was someone who separated himself from country and category.
The most original artist you've never heard of.

His work is mindblowing. Strange monstrous hands and melted faces grip aquariums filled with stripy phallus-fish and plastic crap. Acid-green cock caterpillars crawl around cages filled with violently unnatural roses. Lips, dicks, flowers and electronics are contained in odd boxes and cages exuding violent hyper colours. It's like an alien gardening show in which human beings, supermarket shit and electrical engineering are fused together.

Kudo never showed in the US in his lifetime and is little known to the general public. Yet his legacy is huge; his influence can be seen in the work of David Altmejd, Jake and Dinos Chapman and the late Mike Kelley. "Kudo's works looked less like sculpture than like movie props from lurid science fiction film," Kelley wrote in 2008. "They did not resemble any other contemporary sculpture I was familiar with, and I admired them greatly." He spoke of Kudo's "grotesque rendering of the body, cut into pieces or dissolving into puddles of goo." Paul McCarthy, meanwhile, has been discussing Kudo in lectures since 1968, and talked about him in his book Low Life Slow Life: Tidebox Tidebook.

According to the highly respected New York gallerist Andrea Rosen, who represents Kudo's estate, the artist was recognised during his lifetime, but that attention faded. "It wasn't just that it was out of fashion," she says, "but that we actually stopped really being able to digest this more visceral work. It's people like Paul McCarthy that allowed us to really look at Kudo's work again. If you talk to Paul, he would say he was in Paris in the 60s looking at Kudo's work and it was the greatest influence in his life. It's two-sided – because of someone like Paul we're able to really look at the works again. But it's because of Kudo that we have Paul."

"Kudo is a great artist because he's complex, and that's what great art is. Great art can transform itself through time to take on new information. And not all artists can do that" – Andrea Rosen

Kudo emerged from the radical post-war Tokyo art scene. He was born in 1935 in Osaka to parents who were painters and teachers. In 1954 he entered the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music and quickly rebelled against the traditional education system, forming collectives and organising events and exhibitions. He stayed in the city after graduation in 1958, flirting with scenes like neo-dada and regularly entering the Yomiuri Independent, an annual salon show that was the biggest contemporary space for emerging art. Alongside abstract paintings incorporating found objects, he created a number of anti-art performances, in one instance creating gesture paintings with his hands and feet using splashed paint on canvases on the floor and walls.

By 1960, he was largely working with sculpture and junk materials, making scrubbing brushes that look like sea urchins and cotton gloves shaped like amoebas. In 1961, in protest at the signing of the US/Japan mutual security treaty, Kudo created his breakthrough work, the installation "Philosophy of Impotence", which took up an entire room at the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum as part of the Yomiuri Independent exhibition. He hung the walls and ceiling of the black space with penises sculpted from tape and inlaid with mini-lightbulbs that looked like pre-cum. The approach was different from the work of, say, Yayoi Kusama or Louise Bourgeois. Kudo was not making work about patriarchy or sex; he was looking for something post-sexual, working to "find the ground zero of sex, the ground zero of culture."

This landmark work was a formative influence on young Japanese artist Yoshinori Niwa, who says: "I was so excited for the potential of art every time I saw his documentary photograph of 'Philosophy of Impotence'. I began to make performance works. Not at opening parties of exhibitions, but always in public spaces and political stages. A self-critical performance like Kudo's punctures a small hole through which to get out of the ordinary way of thinking." Also included in the exhibition was a painting Kudo made with black string called "Proliferating Chain Reaction in Limited Pool". He won a prize for the show, and immediately used the money to go to Paris.

"Kudo's works looked less like sculpture than like movie props from lurid science fiction film" – Mike Kelley

Despite not speaking any French, when Kudo arrived in 1962 he managed to hook up with critic Jean-Jacques Lebel, who invited him to enact “happenings”. Allan Kaprow described one of these in his book Assemblage, Environments and Happenings (1966): “Kudo as sex priest makes silent sermon with immense papier-mache phallus, then screams in Japanese, caresses public with the phallus, goes into mystic orgasm then collapses.” Kudo wasn’t really the “sex priest” Kaprow thought he was, but given that other performances included giving “products” called Dry Penis and Instant Sperm to audience members like Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray, you can understand the assumption.

In Paris, Kudo’s work changed dramatically. He didn’t have a proper studio, so began making smaller objects with kitchen utensils and odd plastic objects. He increasingly referenced nuclear physics with titles like “Proliferous Chain Reaction in X-style Basic Substance”. Boxes became a central motif, resulting in works like 1962’s “Bottled Humanism”, a sculpture of a bloodied plastic foetal thing in a jar labelled “Kudo Co. Ltd”. “We are born from a box (womb),” Kudo later wrote, “live our lives in a box (apartment), and after death we end up in a box (coffin).”

He developed a very personal visual language, adding moulded body parts to his increasingly grotesque sculptures – eyeballs, melted skin, brains, disembodied hands. Many saw his work as a response to nuclear holocaust and Japanese experience, but Kudo’s emphasis was actually on metamorphosis. “It is not just a question of appearance, since everything is in a state of transformation,” he said. “The body itself is changing.” In the late 60s, he made small terrariums and greenhouses filled with eyeballs, noses, penises and electronic circuitry covered in resin and soil, glowing with fluoro spraypaint. The works were proto post-humanist – a fusion of the organic and inorganic, a utopian vision of post-nuclear ecology he called “cultivation by radioactivity”.

In a 1972 solo show at the Stedelijk in Amsterdam, Kudo called for a rethink about the relationship between nature, humanity and technology. “Pollution of nature! Decomposition of humanity (humanism)! The end of the world!” he said. “These exclamations are fashionable nowadays but this situation is neither absolutely catastrophic nor fashionable. This is the ineluctable process for reforming ourselves. Behind this situation there is a great possibility of revolution for us personally.”

He slowed down in the mid-70s, becoming less confrontational and more introverted, working on a series of birdcage sculptures titled Portrait of the Artist in Crisis that saw melting part-figures knitting, praying and playing with string. In 1980 he was hospitalised for alcoholism, and the following year returned to Japan. He split his time between France and Japan for the rest of his life. After being diagnosed with throat cancer in 1987, he began chemo and radiotherapy.
During this period he returned to the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music as a teacher. One of his students was cult artist Makoto Aida. “That image of him – saying no to meals, sucking nutrient drinks from small glass bottles through a thin straw – is an impression etched on to my memory,” he says. “In his room he would be drinking from midday onwards, playing dated folk songs at full volume that echoed endlessly down the corridors. The sight of him, always seeming to be struggling against something, was pitiful – and he was genuine in this for sure – but at the same time one could also sense a touch of the melodramatic about it. Whether Kudo returned to Japan when he perceived that the time of his death was near, or rather whether it was Japan that reduced his lifespan – for me, to this day I still don’t know.” In 1990, at 55, Kudo died of colon cancer.

“I’m very interested in and influenced by Tetsumi Kudo’s cartoon-like or maquette-like forms. His works produce the power to neutralise oppositions such as east and west, personal emotions and universality, and kitsch and sophistication” – Teppei Kaneuji

What is so interesting about Kudo’s work is how prescient it was. His central themes of environmental pollution, deformation, utopian post-humanism and the corrupt could not be more timely for our post-technological world. “Everything is revolving in an extremely rapid cyclone of information,” he said in 1974. “Here (in Japan), humans themselves become informational bits. We become unable to see anything in the midst of the cyclone. One cannot observe oneself, nor see the world. Even the freedom to question does not exist in this place.” He saw his work as an electrocardiogram that aimed to represent the spiritual response to abnormalities of society.

Younger artists are increasingly fascinated by his approach. “I’m very interested in and influenced by Tetsumi Kudo’s cartoon-like or maquette-like forms,” Japanese installation artist and sculptor Teppei Kaneuji says, “as well as the destructive power created by the combination of lurid motifs and physical performances that contradict such forms. His works produce the power to neutralise oppositions such as east and west, personal emotions and universality, and kitsch and sophistication.”

Julie Verhoeven, a British artist who shares Kudo’s fascination with genitalia and colour, is also a fan: “I have only experienced the physical, body-curdling force of his work from books. A sense of grimace and alarm followed swiftly by desire and envy. His work is a violent reminder of what I want to achieve emotionally with my very sorry, polite, output. How to ever achieve that release of the grubby subconscious? To dig in deep and empty the hoover bag of the brain is my goal.”

The uncanny work of Kudo is increasingly being rethought into the canon of art. As Rosen notes: “He’s a great artist because he’s complex, and that’s what great art is. Great art is something that can transform itself through time to take on new information. And not all artists can do that.”

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COUNTER FORMS
Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

For 'Counter Forms', curator Elena Filipovic brought together the work of Tetsumi Kudo, Alina Szapocznikow, Paul Thek and Hannah Wilke. This deeply researched selection rehabilitated the significance of a group of somewhat under-theorized artists, suggesting that the manner in which they engaged with the body has had profound implications for contemporary art practice. Each artist has attracted institutional re-examination in recent years, on the heels of which Filipovic accepted the invitation to bring together several works never before seen in the US. While Kudo, Szapocznikow, Thek and Wilke never worked together, and may only have had a passing familiarity with each other's practices, they share formal approaches and ideological relationships to the chaos and destruction of the mid-20th-century.

It is tempting to read these works through each artist's biography. Kudo's dismembered, haunted terrariums as post-Hiroshima provocations about radioactivity and impotence; Thek's morbid enclosures of flesh might be read (anachronistically) along with his diagnosis with AIDS; Wilke's latex and terracotta forms have a vocabulary of vulnerability (the artist succumbed to a well-documented battle with lymphoma in 1993). Szapocznikow's biography – life in Nazi-occupied Poland, tuberculosis and terminal breast cancer – has likewise heavily influenced much commentary on her work. Filipovic measured such interpretations carefully, opting for a revised reading that counters perceived wisdom about the period.

Kudo rose out of the young Japanese Neo-Dada Organizers whose milieu was the burned detritus of the war-torn city. His striking models and psychedelic colours were a key influence on Mike Kelley, who once described the work as resembling 'movie props from lurid science fiction scenes'. Likewise, in other writings, Kelley cited Thek as being among the first to show him the potential of large-scale environments constructed through recycled, heterogeneous materials.

The chilling presentation at Andrea Rosen connected Kudo's view of humanity with Thek's objectification of the carnal – both are obsessed with scientism gone awry. The former's themes of radioactive-induced-impotence, garish neons and impossible biologies interact with Thek's 'Technological Reliquaries' (1964–67), meat sculptures and laboratory-like sections of human forms. Kudo's *for nostalgic purposes, for your living-room, souvenir 'la mue'* (1965–66), takes direct aim at the US: a tall signpost, labelled 'For Your Living Room', supports cages containing dismembered human forms. The work represents Kudo's response to the overextension of American scientific and military advancements.

The most pronounced counters to minimalism are found in the objects from Wilke. Her painted terracotta sculptures make simple, near-accidental forms carry provocative messages. Wilke began working with gum, which she viewed as a metaphor for women's role in society – 'chew her up, get what you want out of her, throw her out and pop in a new piece'.

Szapocznikow's haunting *Foot [Fetish V]* (1971) was made in France after her diagnosis with cancer. Anchored by a cast of the artist's foot, a dried blue nylon stocking emerges, resembling the tibia and fibula with considerable anatomical veracity. Newspaper and polyester resin moulds join a flesh-coloured cast of the artist's breast. It provides the balancing support for a disfigured human leg lying desolate, abandoned from the body. In an adjacent room were several of Szapocznikow's *Petite Tumeurs*, polyester resin and gauze sculptures that she began making shortly after her diagnosis in 1969. Hanging nearby was Kudo's *You are metamorphosing* (1967), a green biomorphic form that mimicked the process of two organs duplicating.

What was most striking about 'Counter Forms' was the way in which these works' appeals to the abject seemed wholly contemporary, while the industrial sheen and conceptual gestures of their better-known peers remains pegged to its historical period. The abject is still a theme of great interest to so many of our strongest voices. One thinks of artists such as Robert Gober, Paul McCarthy, David Altmejd and the late Kelley, whose work deals in personal reflections on memory, fascinations with a latent human form, or nightmarish technological situations. The subtext in 'Counter Forms' might have been how these artists embraced Susan Sontag's famous call for an 'erotics of art'. Their work relies on a direct, sensuous connection with what is almost always a human subject, be it memory, fear, disease or inhuman manipulation. Historians searching for a clean post-conceptual lineage of what we mean when we speak of contemporary art will find this show troubling.

MICHAEL PEPI

MIKE KELLEY

Cultivation by Radioactivity[※1]

I first became aware of the work of Japanese artist Tetsumi Kudo some time in the early 1970s, through two books: Allan Kaprow's *Assemblage, Environments & Happenings* and Udo Kultermann's *Art and Life*.[※2] Both books had a profound influence on me, yet they suffered from the same fault of providing very little information about the artists and works pictured within them. The photographs of Kudo's performances intrigued me immensely, as did those of performances by Joseph Beuys (fig. 1), which were included in Kultermann's book. It seemed to me that the two artists shared certain characteristics: their actions took place in gallery spaces or the street and not in theaters, nightclubs, or other traditional performance venues; sculptures and objects were manipulated live, bringing a theatrical slant to the practice of sculpture; and both artists were dandies of sorts, adopting a mode of dress that immediately set them in clear opposition to their audience. In the case of Beuys, this consisted of a costume akin to hunter's garb accented with a fedora; for his part, Kudo often shaved his head and dressed in fluorescent green, sporting pop plastic sunglasses of the same color.[※3] What these costumes signified I did not know, but it seemed clear that their purpose was to position the artists overtly in the tradition of the performer. I appreciated this negation of the image of the artist as an "everyman," as exemplified in the often-published photos of Jackson Pollock painting in his studio dressed in work clothes. In opposition to this symbolic refusal of the special role of artists in society (they are "workers" like any other), Kudo and Beuys, like clowns, visually set themselves at odds with normal behavior. Though I did not necessarily feel the need to position myself in one camp or the other relative to the politics of artists' fashion, I was curious about how, and why, exactly these two artists tackled the issue. For me, as an American who understood that artists, clearly, were not thought of as being productive members of society, this kind of self-presentation as culturally "other" made perfect sense. The artist was, inherently, closer to the fetishized position of the performer than to the daily laborer.

Both artists appeared to me to be addressing notions of the ritualistic, though the symbolic terms at operation in their works were not immediately understandable. Nevertheless, the works had a poetic ambiguity about them that I found compelling. Beyond those attributes that could be observed in these still photographs of temporal events, there was little I could discover about Kudo's practice. No publications about the artist were available in English (just as there was nothing in English about the more well-known Beuys either), and I was frustrated in my attempts to find out anything about him. At the end of the 1970s, I came across a catalogue for a solo museum exhibition in Germany.[※4] This book revealed another side of Kudo—his sculptures and assemblages. I found these works just as fascinating as the performance documentation, but clearer in meaning: there was a prevailing obsession with the theme of impotence linked to nuclear attack,[※5] a penchant for grotesque renderings of the body, cut into pieces or dissolving into puddles of goo, and a science-fictional dystopian picturing of the body as part machine. The closest equivalent I had seen of these sculptures was the assemblage works of Edward Kienholz (fig. 2). There was a similar embrace of the grotesque, the employment of tableaulike setups with narrative overtones, and a distinctly misanthropic attitude. But in opposition to the works of Kienholz, the color palette of which tended toward dreary grays and browns reminiscent of the downer coloration of social realist painting, Kudo's sculptures were garish, almost psychedelic in coloration—painted with fluorescent pigments and incorporating brightly hued cheap plastic items and fabrics. I had never before seen sculpture that utilized such colors, especially aligned with this kind of subject matter. Kudo's works looked less like sculpture than like movie props from lurid science fiction films. They did

not resemble any other contemporary sculpture I was familiar with, and I admired them greatly. I was immediately reminded of the aesthetics of the outlandish films of Ishiro Honda, the extremely popular Japanese director famous for such science fiction/fantasy films as *Godzilla, King of the Monsters* (U.S. release, 1956) and *Mothra* (1961).

As a child I was obsessed with Honda's movies, especially those of the 1960s, when they achieved a level of ridiculousness unsurpassed in the history of feature film. They are closer in spirit to puppet shows than to traditional narrative film and are unapologetically outlandish and unnaturalistic in their mise-en-scène. Actors outfitted in monstrous rubber costumes (or sometimes puppets) engage in battle in sets of architectural miniatures. Films such as *Space Amoeba* (1970) revel in the depiction of nearly abstract biomorphic monstrosities (fig. 3). Honda's *Matango* (also known as *Attack of the Mushroom People*) (1963) contains scenes remarkably similar in content to some of Kudo's iconography. The film concerns a group of castaways on a remote island who devolve into globs of primordial slime after ingesting a local hallucinogenic mushroom. More to the point, Honda's films return again and again to the theme of the revenge of nature, especially in relation to the moral and ecological transgression of nuclear testing. Starting with *Gojira*, the original *Godzilla* film (1954), his movies are morality tales, ecological disaster films in which monsters, awakened by or the result of atomic bomb blasts, wreak havoc on Earth. This is a common theme in postwar science fiction film. The American film *Them!* (1954), for example, features mutated ants (grown to gigantic proportions as the result of exposure to atomic radiation) that threaten to eradicate humankind. [※6] Obviously, Honda's films, set as they are in Japan, cannot be understood without reference to the American nuclear assault on that country at the end of World War II.

In his work, Kudo conflates the themes of radioactive mutation and impotence. I find it difficult not to understand a Happening such as "Hara-kiri of Humanism" (1963), in which Kudo dressed in traditional attire and simulated the Japanese militaristic ritual suicide, as a kind of cultural castration, pointing toward the defeat of Imperial Japan by the West (through the employment of the atomic bomb) (see page 220). But, generally, Kudo's evocation of impotence takes the form of depictions of mutated human beings in which the phallus is separated from the body. These disembodied phalli (as well as other sense organs such as lips or noses) are presented as pets, domesticated and on display in birdcages. For *Your Portrait (Votre portrait)* (1966), Kudo himself sat inside a box—dressed in his signature performative attire—with such a phallic birdcage, surrounded by body parts and cash register receipts (fig. 4). In other works, such as *Cultivation by Radioactivity in the Electronic Circuit* (1969), the body parts are housed in structures similar to hothouses or terrariums, as if they are delicate life forms that require specialized environments (plates 38, 39). And in the sculptural installation/Happening "Philosophy of Impotence" (1963), Kudo was surrounded by a forest of hanging phalli, seemingly dragged down by their combined weight (see pages 216~218). (My knowledge of his actions is limited to what I can decipher from photographs; I have never seen written descriptions or filmic documentations of them, so I can only respond to them iconographically.)

These postnuclear representations of the New Man are of impotent mutations, cut off from body and nature. They are the result of the transgressions of science and can survive only through reliance on prosthetic technology. Some of these body parts are covered with electronic diagrams; others are outfitted with wires connected to cheap electronics, such as transistor radios. Many of the figures are little more than brains, infantilized and rolled about in baby carriages, as in *Your Portrait '67* (1967) (plate 33), or sliding into puddles of rot in beach chairs as if melted by a nuclear sun, as in *Your Portrait* (1964) (plate 23). The image of the disembodied brain is a staple of science fiction film and literature. It evolved from a simplistic reading of evolutionary theory, as if the progressive increase in humans' cranial size necessarily leads to the end result of mind divorced from body. Kudo runs with this idea: in his sculpture *Love (L'amour)* (1964), two cranial lumps, seated on chairs and facing each other with lips pressed together, can express their desire for each other only through the electronic dots and dashes of Morse code (plate 22).

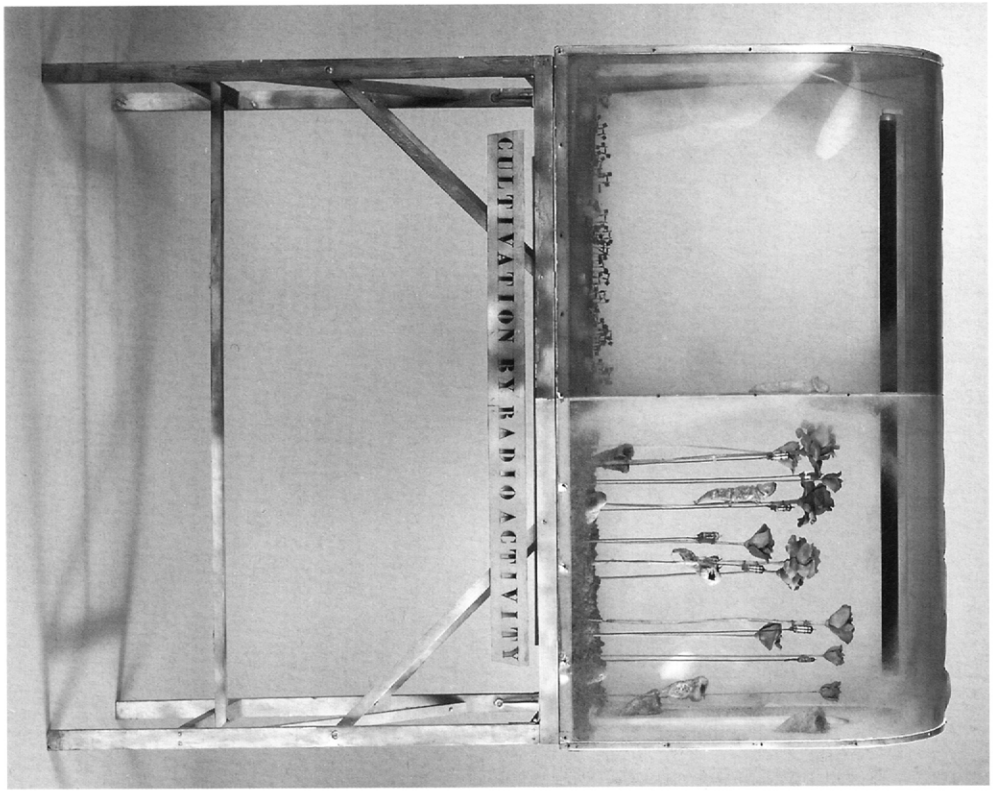
3. Promotional still for the film *Space Amoeba*, 1970, directed by Ishiro Honda; 4. Tetsumi Kudo, *Your Portrait (Votre portrait)*, 1966 (plate 19)

Kudo is a cruel scientist who views the New Man as little more than a laboratory test animal—a throwaway in the service of technological culture, and perhaps his own aesthetic experiments as well. [※7] In a 1966 letter to W. A. L. Beeren, the director of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, Kudo scoffs at the man's Christian principles and humanist philosophy, which he considered to be naïve and out-of-date belief systems. He writes, "I observe you, myself, and all other human beings the same way a doctor observes guinea-pigs." [※8] In photographs of the Happening "Sneeze of Guinea Pigs" (1966), Kudo looks to be releasing some kind of noxious gas into a crowd (fig. 5); the spectators cover their mouths and noses and turn away from him in disgust. [※9] He is, I assume, equally disgusted by them.

Oddly enough, in a further exchange with Beeren, Kudo expresses his optimism about the future and seems to comment favorably on the radical student political movements of the period. [※10] In another text, dated 1971, he writes, "It's important to think about the links between nature, polluted by a proliferation of electronics (machinery), the decomposition of humankind (humanism), and the old, traditional hierarchy of values. These values are breaking down and interpenetrating.... They will eventually produce a completely new form of ecology in our society and in the cosmos. This means that the concept of DOMINATION (primitive antagonism) will be destroyed by the decomposition of values and by the seepage of values into one another.... I forecast, here and now, the growth of the new ecology in the slough of 'polluted nature' and 'decomposing humankind.'" [※11] The current period of mutation, then, is a state of metamorphosis that may, potentially, lead to revolutionary change. This kind of regeneration seems to be the subject of Kudo's hothouse sculptures of the late 1960s and early 1970s. In works such as *Cultivation by Radioactivity* (1967–1968) (fig. 6), *Cultivation of Nature and People Who Are Looking at It* (1971) (plate 42), and *Pollution—Cultivation—New Ecology* (1971–1972) (plates 59, 60), phallic forms grow alongside plants and flowers (or climb on them like garden slugs) that sprout out of the new primordial soup. [※12] These works have a strange beauty about them and are less overtly grotesque than the works of the early to mid-1960s.

To my knowledge, Kudo never exhibited his works in the United States—though in 1962 he left Japan (where he had been involved in Neo-Dada activities in the late 1950s and early 1960s) to reside in Paris. There, he connected with such Pop and Happenings-related artists as Jean-Jacques Lebel and Erró. Interestingly, Kudo's work is reminiscent in some ways of that of another Japanese expatriate artist of the same generation, Yayoi Kusama, who moved to New York City in 1958. Both artists created performance events related to social and sexual politics and produced artworks featuring fetishistic multiplications of phallic forms, as seen in Kusama's *Accumulation* works of the early 1960s in which common objects are covered with penile protuberances (fig. 7). [※13] Though the motivations for their works do not appear to be the same, nevertheless it raises the question of what links there might be between their practices relative to Japanese postwar culture. Only recently have American institutions presented Japanese postwar art, and to date very little in-depth information has been available to Western audiences about the Japanese avant-garde.

Certain critics have described Kudo's work, negatively, as protest art. In a review of an exhibition in Paris in 1970, Judith Applegate criticizes Kudo's work as being overly direct, writing, "Nothing is left to the subtler, often more powerful methods of multi-layered and multi-meaninged metaphor, which elevates mere protest to art." [※14] I find this viewpoint difficult to understand; Kudo's work is complex in its symbolic meaning, is extremely metaphorical, and bears little relationship to traditional agitprop or social realist art. His material usage is far more broad and experimental than that of conventional social realism, and his work is formally playful. He utilized common, mass-produced found objects in his sculptures and colored some of them with fluorescent paints, which gives his works an almost "psychedelic" tinge and, at first glance, a Pop-like appearance. Still, it is interesting to compare Kudo's work to a Japanese "social realist" artist of the previous generation such as Yamashita Kikuji—though Yamashita's work is, itself, hardly typical of social realist art. In his painting *Totems/Oto Totemu* (1951), we are presented with a



5. Tetsumi Kudo in the Happening "Sneeze of Guinea Pigs," presented at the *Festival de la Libre Expression*, at Théâtre de la Chimère, Paris, April 26, 1966; 6. Tetsumi Kudo, *Cultivation by Radioactivity*, 1967–1968 (plate 37)

7. Yayoi Kusama, *Collage*, circa 1966 (no longer extant), with photograph by Hal Reiff of Kusama reclining on *Accumulation No. 2*, Courtesy of Yayoi Kusama Studio; 8. Yamashita Kikuji, *Totems/Oto Totemu*, 1951, 28 3/4 x 46 1/16 (73 x 117 cm), Courtesy of Gallery Nippon

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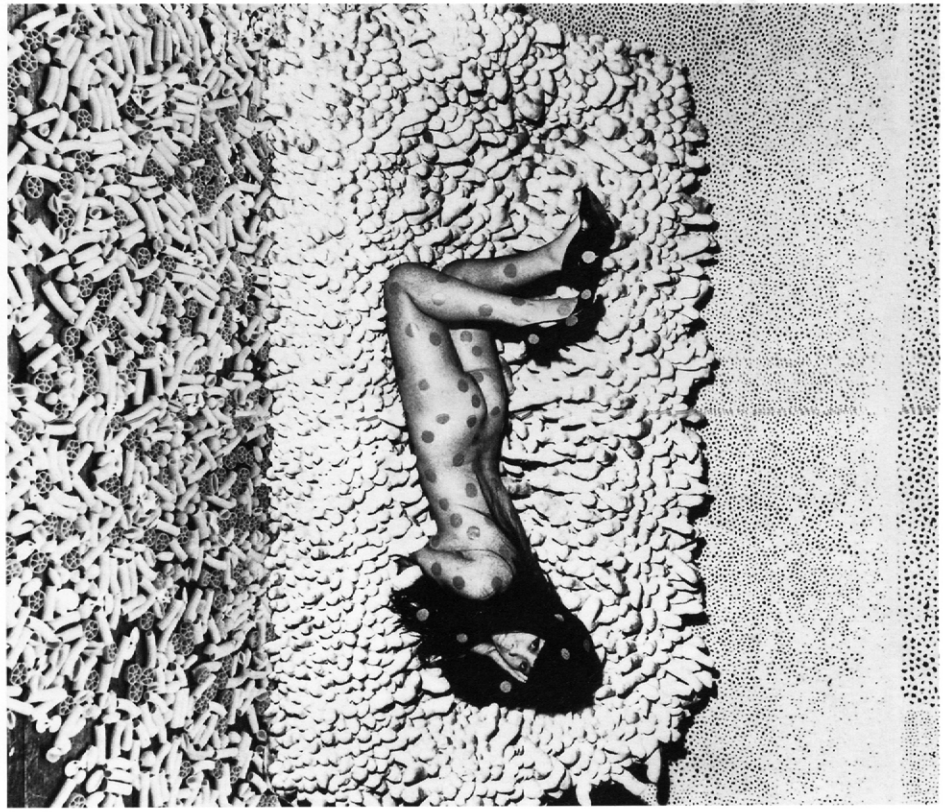


Dalíesque landscape made up of postwar urban decay, grotesque diseased figures, and strange sexualized conflations of female figures and lighthouses (fig. 8). This work is not unlike similar paintings produced in Europe or America from the 1930s on—part of that lineage of painting that mixed Surrealist and social realist tendencies following the critical success of Picasso's *Guernica* in 1937 (an American example would be the painter Peter Blume). Art history has not looked kindly on this branch of modernism, and such works have been relegated to the storage rooms of museums. In 1960s America, this aversion to artworks in which modernist and sociopolitical elements were seen to coincide continued to be the norm. This is especially evident in American Pop art, which traditionally was surface-oriented—devoid of "deep meaning." At least in the art world, there was antipathy toward psycho/social readings of popular iconographies. This would explain why Kudo's work did not find an audience here and why he would be more at home in Europe, where Pop-related artists such as Erró or Öyvind Fahlström made works that directly addressed social concerns.

But, an even more important difference between Kudo and this previous generation of social realist artists lies in his rejection of an existentialist humanist politic. Kudo saw the postnuclear period as the end of the world as far as humanist sentiments go—but it was also an end point at which new growth could begin. He saw some kind of parallel between his activities and the radical student movements of the late 1960s, though he was not, generationally or actively, a part of that. Despite the fact that the youth culture rebellion of the 1960s did not provide the seedbed for social change that Kudo might have wished for (we are, it seems, in the same era of social and ecological decay now as we were then), if Kudo was correct in his nonpessimistic stance, then we are still capable of metamorphosing out of this period of corruption into a new state of being. Let's hope so.

Mike Kelley is an artist who lives in Los Angeles.

※NOTES※

1. This title derives from a group of works by Tetsumi Kudo from 1967–1970.

2. Allan Kaprow, *Assemblage, Environments & Happenings* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1966); and Udo Kultermann, *Art and Life* (New York: Praeger, 1971).

3. Because I had seen only black-and-white photographs of Kudo's actions, I had originally assumed his outfit was white. I have since been provided with a statement by Kudo's wife, Hiroko, who recalls the artist explaining his costume as follows: "I wanted to represent an insectlike creature or an alien from another planet." E-mail message from Doryun Chong, March 25, 2008.

4. *Tetsumi Kudo: Cultivation by Radioactivity* (Düsseldorf: Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, 1970).

5. In the introduction to a selection of reproductions of works and statements by the artist in "Tetsumi Kudo," *Documents*, no. 2 (February 1993), the editor writes that the artist "witnessed the shock and horror of Hiroshima with his own eyes" (p. 38). I can find no other verification of this statement.

6. *Them!* directed by Gordon Douglas, Warner Brothers, USA.

7. My reading of Kudo as playing the role of the scientist or doctor is borne out in a production still from the film *Your Portrait* (1967), by Erik Van Zuylen, which shows Kudo—dressed in a doctor's uniform—at work on one of his cocoon sculptures; see pages 232, 233.

8. The letter was reproduced in the unpaginated exhibition pamphlet *Kudo* (Amsterdam: Galerie 20, 1966) and is reprinted in this volume on pages 101–104.

9. The spray in fact contained black pepper, which caused the audience to sneeze uncontrollably.

10. Excerpts of this dialogue, which took place on October 25, 1968, were published in the unpaginated gallery exhibition catalogue *Kudo: Cultivation by Radioactivity in the Electronic Circuit* (Loenersloot, the Netherlands: Galerie Mickery, 1968).

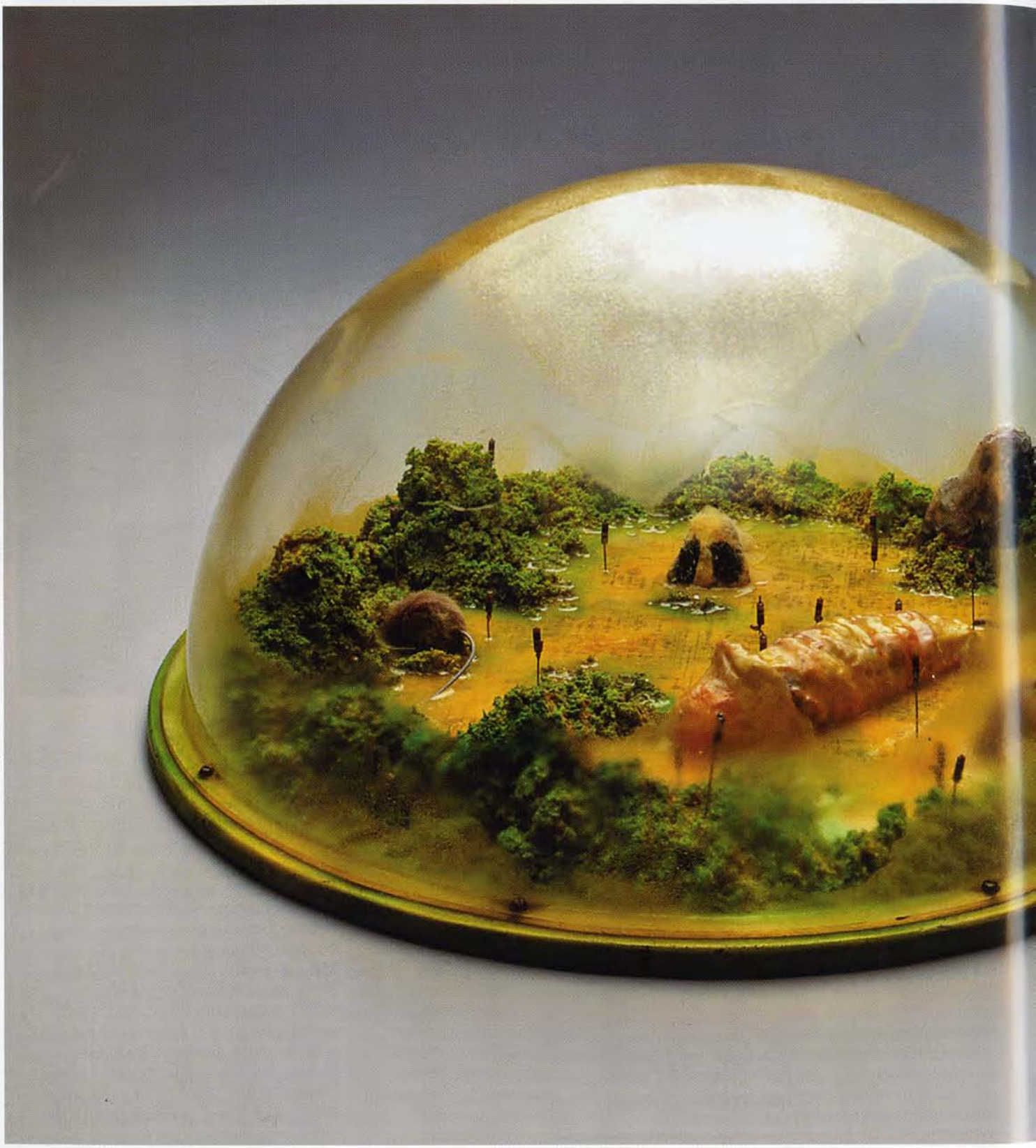
11. Published in "Tetsumi Kudo," 39, 41. Kudo's statement is reprinted in translation on pages 129–131 in this book.

12. A photograph of Kudo's installation at the Venice Biennale in 1976, reproduced in *Domus*, no. 564 (November 1976), shows what look to be enormous photographs of the interiors of such sculptures (p. 12). If this is the case, it would make Kudo an early practitioner of the kind of large-scale photography that is so common today yet would have been very unusual at that time.

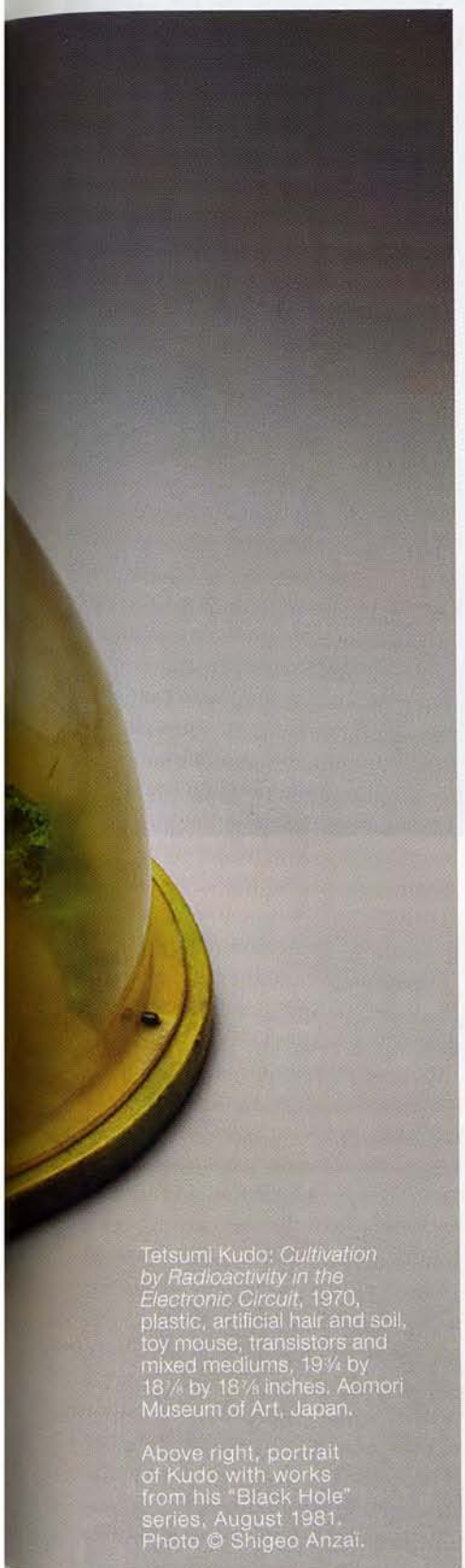
13. For example, Kusama's *Accumulation No. 1* (1962) is an overstuffed chair covered completely with soft phallic forms.

14. Judith Applegate, "Paris," *Art International* 14, no. 9 (November 1970): 80.

DYSTOPIA

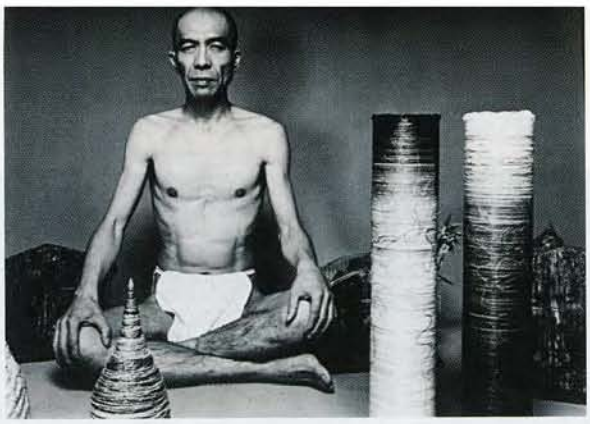


MAN



Tetsumi Kudo: *Cultivation by Radioactivity in the Electronic Circuit*, 1970, plastic, artificial hair and soil, toy mouse, transistors and mixed mediums, 19¾ by 18⅞ by 18⅞ inches. Aomori Museum of Art, Japan.

Above right, portrait of Kudo with works from his "Black Hole" series, August 1981. Photo © Shigeo Anzaï.



TETSUMI KUDO

Nuclear angst and ecological breakdown are specters haunting the first U.S. retrospective to treat this major figure of the Japanese postwar era.

BY RYAN HOLMBERG

IT IS AN UGLY BODY OF WORK. Snot green and biohazard orange are its flagship colors, feces and dick its main forms. The work is intentionally cheap-looking, dominated by lacquered plaster and inexpensive consumer plastics. Through its base materiality and lurid subject matter—characterized by a kind of dystopian science-fiction kitsch—it aims at repulsion. Inside a small hemispherical terrarium work from 1970, for example, is a lemony swampland of lacquered acrylic mucus and spongy lime-colored growth. Circuitry diagrams are visible beneath the effluent, from which sprout small straight transistors, cylinder-topped like cattails. Picturesque in a fashion, the landscape is punctuated with outcroppings—not of rock, but of fat, discolored, plaster noses, their nostrils dark caves of black bristly fur. A nappy toy mouse is stuck in the muck, and a penis crawls through it, slow as the plumpest slug. Or consider a work from 1966: Two striped deck chairs, laid out beneath a parasol for a beachside holiday, glow a caustic fluorescent orange and green under black light. Along the backrests

and seats are smears of what looks like waxy flesh, among the leftovers of a melted woman and a melted man. Polyester foot soles dangle off the end of one chair. Each sitter has one remaining hand, and each hand holds a birdcage. One houses a brain, and the other a bloated and splotchy heart: the couple's organ pets.

The work of Tetsumi Kudo (1935-1990) has had a marginal presence in North America. From time to time, individual pieces have appeared in group shows on abjection or in the rare survey of postwar Japanese art, and in summer 2008 Andrea Rosen in New York presented his first one-person gallery show in the U.S. But Kudo has been by no means obscure. In Japan and Europe, his work is recognized for being as singular as it is outlandish, and since the '60s he has been the subject of numerous exhibitions abroad, both large and small. "Garden of Metamorphosis," the survey of Kudo organized by Doryun Chong for the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, thus aims to introduce a celebrated unknown to a broader North American audience.

As its title suggests, the exhibition presents "metamorphosis" as the prime trope of Kudo's oeuvre. Kudo claimed that the chrysalis best symbolized his philosophy of art. Indeed, the sculptures are filled with cocoon and larval forms, and the materials he chose often render intermediary states between solid and liquid. Though he believed that art has the power to incite and transform the viewer through the presentation of social and existential truths, Kudo was no progressivist. He was antihumanist and strongly antimodernist. The human body is pervasively disfigured throughout his work, and the overriding theme of his dioramas and installations is irreparable earthly degeneration. He places the blame on blind faith in technology and progress, and behind most of his apocalyptic visions is the mother of all man-made catastrophes, nuclear holocaust. Kudo and his apologists have connected this grotesquerie and doom with practices of "negative utopia," in which an enhancement of the undesirable is thought to repel one toward the good. In other words, humanity might be reborn through the exaggeration of its failures. Yet even if one embraces, as Chong does, a positive reading of Kudo's work and discerns in the artist's degradations figures of hope, it must also be said that at no point did Kudo offer an optimistic picture of a post-humanist human.

THOUGH HE BELIEVED THAT ART HAS THE POWER TO INCITE AND TRANSFORM THE VIEWER THROUGH THE PRESENTATION OF EXISTENTIAL TRUTHS, KUDO WAS NO HUMANIST.

Above, view of the installation *Philosophy of Impotence, or Distribution Map of Impotence and the Appearance of Protective Domes at the Points of Saturation*, 1961-62. Agnes and Frits Becht Collection, Naarden, the Netherlands.

Opposite, black-light view of (left) *Your Portrait May 66*, 1966, plastic, polyester and mixed mediums, and (right) *Cultivation by Radioactivity (Small Hothouse, Orange, Green)*, 1968, painted Plexiglas and mixed mediums.

Right, *Pollution—Cultivation—New Ecology*, 1971-72, wood, plastic, mirror and mixed mediums, 18¾ by 23¾ by 14⅛ inches. Galerie Albert Benamou, Paris.

Below, Kudo at Mimatsu Shobo Gallery in Shinbashi, Tokyo, summer 1958. Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo.

Kudo began his career in Tokyo in the mid-1950s making heavily impastoed paintings à la Gutai and Art Informel. In 1958, taken by the fad of performative painting, he began publicly punching canvases and smearing paint with his hands and feet. A key figure of the Tokyo Anti-Art movement (1958-62), Kudo was responsible for some of its most iconic assemblages and installations. In 1962, he relocated to Paris, quickly gained recognition for his happenings, and began making art in the vein of Nouveau Réalisme. During his years in Paris, Kudo performed and exhibited often, but his revulsion toward the European intellectual scene seems to have been strong, for in numerous works from the '60s he vehemently attacks modernist and humanist notions. He remained in Paris for 20 years, and from the early '80s on divided his time between France and Japan.

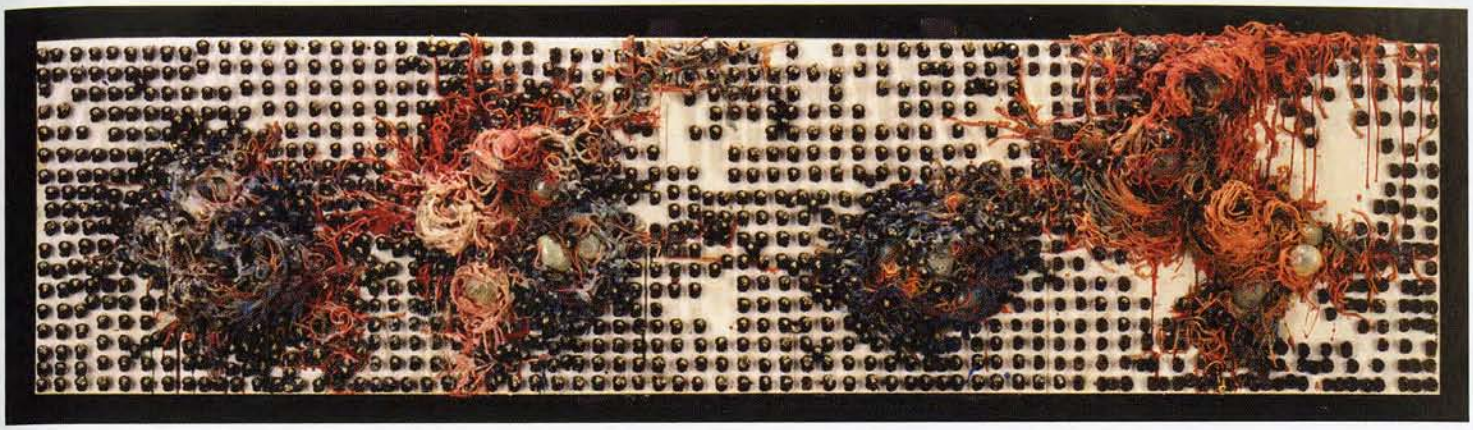
Kudo's work was informed by an atomic imaginary: he titled first his paintings, then his assemblages and biomorphic sculptures made of kitchenware, with phrases that include references to "confluent" or "proliferating" chain reactions. In 1959, he began incorporating into his collages electronic circuitry diagrams, the patterns of which also inspired a series

of loosely geometric assemblages. Kudo was no techno-fetishist, however. In the tradition of the Dadaists and their bachelor machines, he hybridized the mechanical and the biological to cynical effect. In the assemblage *Aggregation-Proliferation* (1960), a switchboardlike base of small, blackened rope knots is overcome by maggoty and visceral elements made of colored string and massed like vomited spaghetti in a thick soup of synthetic resin. Lightbulb eggs have been discharged and incubate in wormy swirls, infesting the orderly grid with parasites and organic entropy. Later in Kudo's career, he would posit such monstrosities as positive and even salvationist. But in the early work, they appear purely catastrophic, like the final failed fusion in the 1958 film *The Fly* (better known in its 1986 remake by David Cronenberg).

Throughout his work, Kudo makes obsessive use of the detached phallus, most famously in *Philosophy of Impotence*, created for the 14th Yomiuri Independent exhibition in Tokyo (1962)—a hotbed of Japanese junk, happenings and assemblage art—and reinstalled at the Walker nearly in its entirety. The work is room-sized and consists of dozens of lumpy foot-long, fecal-phallic shafts wrapped in black electrical tape, with protruding lightbulb heads. They hang like chrysalides from a net stretched across the ceiling and from the pegboard walls. They also run from ceiling to floor in two agglutinated columns, one ending in an element resembling an engorged red cock that spews mop strings (in the original, udon noodles) and magazine pages. In the Walker catalogue, Chong proposes that "what [Kudo] hoped to

Right, *Grafted Garden/Pollution—Cultivation—New Ecology*, 1970-71, metal, plywood, plastic flowers, placard with text and mixed mediums. Centre Pompidou, Paris.

Opposite top, *Aggregation-Proliferation*, 1960, string, rope, film cartridges, lightbulbs and resin on veneer wood, 18⅛ by 70⅞ inches. Aomori Museum of Art.



activate in the viewer's mind was the idea that human beings and their collectivities are ineluctably enslaved by their own drive for self-propagation."[1] Following previous scholars, Chong reads Kudo's interest in "impotence" as a desire for sexual emancipation.

I do not agree that the work is so positive: after all, impotence instituted on a universal scale would entail the end of the species. In *Philosophy of Impotence*, extinction is not on the horizon; the human persists beyond sexual reproduction, in the proliferation of lifelike appendages. And though survival entails degradation—here in the image of metamorphic insects and, in later works, malevolent mushrooms and oozing gastropods—it also brings a peculiar brand of autonomy, as if the penis could spawn itself. The concept of devolution—the idea that species can regress to earlier or lesser states of biological complexity and lower rungs on the evolutionary ladder—is important for understanding Kudo. He conceives his phallocentric fantasy in terms of a radical devolution, with humanity reduced to a single reproductive organ—the penis, rendered in a form bordering on nonhuman.

The centerpiece of the retrospective is *Grafted Garden/Pollution—Cultivation—New Ecology* (1970-71), a sprawling installation of variable dimensions, at the Walker some 30 feet long, 8 feet deep and 8 feet high. Its prime component is a long artificial flowerbed, planted mainly with plastic roses, tulips and chrysanthemums, and inhabited by fake snails. Around the flowerbed are arranged six freestanding trees; they are constructed from aluminum rods and lashed with leafy plastic vegetation, plastic flowers, sporangia and penile slugs. One could go on about piles of plastic shit, transistor maggots, boob mushrooms, etc. A small red toy bird has alighted on a branch, but its putative song is silenced by a scene more campy than horrific.

Grafted Garden has yet one more inhabitant. In Düsseldorf in 1970, Kudo served as art director for a film adaptation of "The Mire," a short story by the absurdist writer Eugène Ionesco. Though the commission went off, Ionesco reportedly disliked Kudo's designs, for reasons that are not known. Kudo, it seems, did not take kindly to the criticism: in many subsequent works from this period, one finds Ionesco's body, in the form of casts and sculptures first made for the movie, maltreated to the max. Chong interprets this as symbolic violence against haughty European intellectualism.[2] In *Grafted Garden*, Ionesco

has been dismembered and beheaded, and hung from the trees. His head is impaled on a metal branch, with a vacuum tube stuck in one eye, a speaker cone substituted for a gouged-out ear, and a sprig placed in a hole bored through his scalp. His entrails, linked to his ripped neck, are unwound and dangled about. A sagging penis is attached near the base of the same tree. Across others are dispersed his arms and legs.

Some of Kudo's "horticulture" can be explained by reading "Pollution-Cultivation-New Ecology" (1971), the manifesto he wrote to accompany a midcareer retrospective at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, in 1972. It begins, "Pollution of nature! Decomposition of humanity (humanism)! The end of the world!" and goes on to identify humanity's exploitation of the natural and physical as the root problem. "Conquered nature," Kudo writes, "is starting to take its revenge" as pollution grows and people lose power over technology.[3] There is some topicality to these statements. In early '70s Japan, environmental ruin was *the* political issue. Widespread protest movements and litigation against polluting petrochemical plants gained their greatest strength and publicity during those years. A text by Kudo from 1974 mentions airborne toxins, fish deformations, and the mercury and cadmium poisoning of Japanese waterways.[4] In the earlier manifesto, however, Kudo deals in romantic generalities of man versus nature, and offers only fantastic solutions. He prophesizes a "new ecology," in which humanity, nature and electronics are integrated for mutual survival. However, the accompanying illustrations that diagram potential reconfigurations are sketchy and absurd. One shows a feedback loop linking a television, an aquarium with goldfish, a cactus and a potted Ionesco head. *Grafted Garden* and related dioramas should be understood as sculptural analogues of the manifesto and its drawings.

With its concern for the environment, the "Pollution-Cultivation-New Ecology" manifesto might seem timely today. However, it concludes with a recommendation neither of its moment nor of ours. "Irradiate" humans, it commands, in order "to reform their conservative and egoistical heads." In the period prior to its publication, between 1967 and 1970, Kudo had created a group of hothouses and terraria (like the one described at the beginning of this essay) under the collective title "Cultivation by Radioactivity." Human noses, eyeballs and penises are placed within various inhospitable landscapes, from Mars-like desert to piss-colored marsh. Transistors sprout like new-growth seedlings. Most of the hothouses are spray-painted fluorescent green or orange along their wooden frames and at the edges of their transparent scrims; the Walker exhibited one under black light. This series, clearly a prelude to the "New Ecology" manifesto, emphasizes the fact that Kudo's dominant frame of reference in the late '60s and early '70s remained the atomic '50s. His dioramas are more in the nightmarish vein of Cold War science fiction than in the forward-looking spirit of environmental activism or in visionary works such as Ernest Callenbach's 1975 novel *Ecotopia*. In his contribution to the Walker catalogue, artist Mike Kelley makes the obvious but apposite comparison to *Godzilla* and *Matango*, icons of postwar Japanese science-fiction film that feature mutant products of the nuclear imagination.[5] In the case of Kudo, the stereotype applies: postwar Japanese art is overdetermined by the atomic bombings of 1945.[6]

Beginning in 1975, Kudo created a number of works titled "Portrait of the Artist in Crisis," in which a cast polyester face—sometimes of Ionesco, other times a male smoker reminiscent of Kudo himself—is placed inside a birdcage, accompanied by hands, penises and internal organs and painted in awful combinations of pastel and fluorescent colors. Often, the caged artist is shown knitting, his creativity going on and on pointlessly and without end. Kudo went on to make variations on the birdcage, substituting mystical figures derived from Buddhism. In *Buddha in Paris* (1977), for example, a mealy and decrepit head meditates, two eyes closed and a third opened upon its brow. String-wrapped egg shapes rise from the two upturned hands and circle the cage like celestial orbs. Evidently, Kudo saw the existential crisis of the artist as being homologous to issues of spiritual enlightenment and divine insight.

The knitting theme was similarly reappraised. In various works from 1979, thin multicolored strings spiral outward from the mystic's third eye and dangle from his hands. According to Chong, Kudo thought of these strings as "hereditary chromosomes" that link together all of humanity across time.[7] Between 1978 and 1980, in performances titled "Ceremony," the artist himself sat meditating to tape recordings of the Heart Sutra and Gregorian chants, manipulating strings symbolic of the universe between his praying hands. In less than a decade, Kudo's self-fashioning had gone from prophet of the apocalypse to sage and mystic seer.

In the early 1980s, as Kudo negotiated a part-time return to his homeland, he turned to pure atavism. Formally, the works between 1980 and 1984 look innocent enough. Most are small sculptures, rarely more than a foot or two high, made once again of multicolored strands of string, now wound around ovoid or cylindrical cores. There is a general spinning and spiraling effect, or, in the case of twin forms, the impression of one

1 Doryun Chong, "When the Body Changes into New Forms: Tracing Tetsumi Kudo," in Chong, ed., *Tetsumi Kudo: Garden of Metamorphosis*, Minneapolis, Walker Art Center, 2008, p. 29. **2** Ibid., p. 36. **3** Tetsumi Kudo, "Pollution-Cultivation-New Ecology" [1971], reprinted in *Tetsumi Kudo*, pp. 130-31. **4** Kudo interviewing himself, "Conversation with Kudo, Paris, 1974" [1974], trans. Michael Gilson, in *Tetsumi Kudo*, p. 154. **5** Mike Kelley, "Cultivation by Radioactivity," in *Tetsumi Kudo*, p. 52. **6** This stereotype has been voiced over the decades by many artists and critics, among them Takashi Murakami, who curated the popular exhibition "Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture" at the Japan Society in New York in 2005. **7** Chong, p. 39. **8** Kudo, "On the Structure of the Japanese System" [1984], trans. Michael Gilson, in *Tetsumi Kudo*, p. 184. **9** Chong, p. 40.

"Tetsumi Kudo: Garden of Metamorphosis" is on view at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis [through Mar. 22].

RYAN HOLMBERG is a writer and art historian based in New York.

Portrait of the Artist in Crisis, 1978, painted cage, cotton, plastic and mixed mediums, 11½ by 17¾ by 7⅞ inches. Aomori Museum of Art. All photos this article courtesy Estate of Tetsumi Kudo.

shape cast from or sucked in by the other. Kudo's words, however, describe something more thematically problematic, as he claims the pieces represent "the organizational structure that developed from the depths of time among the indigenous peoples of Japan's islands . . . [and that] continues to exist in Japan, unchanged since the Stone Age, through the era governed by the Imperial Family, until our time, ruled by technology and the mass media."[8]

Chong describes this late work as an "exploration of the heart of the matter" of Japanese culture.[9] He is too kind. For in his late period, Kudo capitulates to some of the most suspect ideological constructs of 20th-century Japan. His art and written statements are informed by a mishmash of notions concerning Japanese history, nationalism and ethnogenesis. Such ideas have had a vibrant life within both Japanese right-wing cultural circles and the postwar avant-garde, particularly among artists entering later stages of their careers, from Kudo to Tatsumi Hijikata and Hiroshi Sugimoto. Here too, one might recognize the continuing presence of 1945, with the memory and the prospect of nuclear annihilation opening up a wormhole to some lost and idealized community. It is telling that Kudo cites the Imperial Family and the Stone Age—referring to the neolithic Jomon culture and its highly expressive pottery forms—as the fountainheads of a timeless Japanese spirit, for these were the rallying points widely promoted after World War II to reground a ruined Japanese identity, without recourse to progressive politics. Unable or unwilling throughout his career to formulate robust political responses to the major crises of the postwar period—from atomic bombings to environmental ruin—Kudo at last found refuge in the immortality of a fictive national collective. It would be unfair to dismiss the early work in light of the late. Nonetheless, the panorama offered by "Garden of Metamorphosis" allows one to speculate that the motif of regression dominant in Kudo's dystopic works of the '60s paved the way, however unwittingly, for the regressive politics and atavism he embraced at the end of his career. ○

MODERN PAINTERS

Tetsumi Kudo

By Jane Blocker
Published February 1, 2009

T etsumi Kudo: Garden of Metamorphosis at Walker Art Center (Minneapolis, Minnesota) October 18, 2008M arch 22, 2009

Tetsumi Kudo (1935-1990) once made a small collage that incorporated bits of electrical engineering diagrams. This yellowed paper, covered in tiny, precisely printed black figures that represent alternating and direct currents, conductors, and resistors, would become an integral material persistently appearing throughout his oeuvre. One might think of it, within the context of the exhibition at the Walker Art Center, not as a diagram of electrical circuitry but as a genealogy showing lines of historical force, which Kudo s art productively disrupts and reconfigures. The first solo museum show of Kudo's work in the US, Garden of Metamorphosis seeks to rearrange our understanding of postwar art — its key figures, energies, stylistic and theoretical circuitry, and highly charged lines of influence.

Kudo is perhaps best known for his collaged sculptures and installations, in which he used a surprising array of found materials a tree stump, nails, human hair, electrical cords, black tape, ropes, scrub brushes, lightbulbs, plastic tubes, electrical wire, Peg-Board, synthetic resin, film cartridges, plastic bowls, glass jars, birdcages, and images of muscle-bound men in calisthenics poses. We might be tempted to chart connections between his Philosophy of Impotence (1961-62) and Atsuko Tanaka s Electric Dress (1956), between his Your Portrait, Your Game (1962-63) and Joseph Cornell s found materials and arcades, or between Kudo s knotted strings and tangled cords and Bruce Conner s detritus aesthetic. However, the wall text and catalogue repeatedly warned against reductive lineages, particularly since Kudo fiercely maintained his independence and cultivated an idiosyncratic persona.

Indeed, one of the frustrating and at the same time profoundly important things about curator Doryun Chong s exhibition and catalogue was his intentional ambiguity about not only how, but whether, Kudo can be located within more well known artworld trends. Kudo s early work, from the late 50s, consists of Abstract Expressionist-style paintings (Proliferating Chain Reaction, 1959) and anti-art happenings similar to those of Kazuo Shiraga and other Guta artists, in which Kudo used his own body to smear paint onto unstretched canvas. From this we might sketch yet another genealogy connecting Kudo to Jackson Pollock, to the Guta group, to Allan Kaprow, and to Yves Klein, but it is unclear who exactly influenced whom or whether "influence" is even a viable historiographic concept. Chong s claim that Kudo was an odd man out casts such historical methods into serious doubt. And some of that doubt fell directly on the exhibition itself. Does this straightforwardly chronological exhibition work against the oddness to which Kudo aspired or the challenge to history that his work invites?

Working in Paris in the 1960s, Kudo pursued and expanded his interests in metamorphosis, and expounded on his philosophy of impotence in which he claimed humankind was entering a new phase humanism itself had become just another commercial slogan and man would have to accept his impotence in the face of nuclear technologies, ecological destruction, and the burgeoning of a plastic culture. Populated by hundreds of phallic shapes that suggest penises and cocoons, molting skin and cracked seed pods, larvae and excrement, his work from this period is both charged with nostalgia (its materials having hardened, yellowed, or crumbled) and seems surprisingly contemporary. Even as we are tempted to draw a line between Kudo and Yayoi Kusama or Louise Bourgeois, we are surprised by how freshly the work seems to address contemporary forms of biopower and ecological destruction.

In his later work made in Japan, Kudo incorporated other somatic fragments such as hands and feet, crafted from paper and molded plastic, and commercially produced plastic body parts such as eyeballs and brains. In Grafted Garden/Pollution Cultivation New Ecology (1970-04), these are combined with plastic flowers and pieces of AstroTurf. Using this vocabulary, Kudo explored the relation between humans and technology, including not only communications (telephones, radios, and Morse code), but nuclear physics, genetics, and computers. One might describe his sculptures and installations, with their green and orange Day-Glo paints viewed in black light (which eerily enhances their radioactive appearance) and their seemingly melted or dismembered bodies, as a particularly visceral form of posthumanism avant la lettre.

In addition to learning about Tetsumi Kudo s remarkable works and the enormous contribution he made to the art of the last half century or more, this exhibition instructed us to rethink contemporary art history. If the European critics got it wrong when they characterized Kudo as the exemplar of postwar and postnuclear Japanese trauma; if Allan Kaprow got it wrong when he described Kudo (with his works many phalluses) as a sex priest; and if the artist gave little indication of how he would have situated himself artistically and art historically, how do we then, as Chong writes, position his work in relation to some of his contemporaries ? We must cut apart style, appearance, and artistic method. We must dislocate movements and associations. We must, following Kudo s example, think in more complex terms of voltages and circuits, step-downs, and resistance.

Tetsumi Kudo originally appeared in the February 2009 issue of Modern Painters. For a complete list of articles from this issue available on ARTINFO, see Modern Painters February 2009 Table of Contents.

frieze .com
Published on 10/07/08

Tetsumi Kudo

Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, USA

Tetsumi Kudo's work has influenced artists including Paul McCarthy and Mike Kelley, though, outside of Europe and Japan, his work remains more influential than it is widely known. The current exhibition at Andrea Rosen – which precedes a major retrospective at the Walker Art Center this autumn – is part of what appears to be an organized initiative to introduce Kudo's work to an American audience.

Kudo, who died in 1990, fashioned a world of DayGlo horror that counters chaos with control. Accordingly, this exhibition (adroitly curated by Joshua Mack in collaboration with Hiroko Kudo) transforms the gallery into a hellish hothouse: thermometers take the temperature of protuberances rising out of the soil; penis-faced parakeets sit in a cage like unhappy products of genetic experimentation (Your Portrait, 1965-66).

These sculptures, in which genitalia and dismembered body parts appear with mind-numbing regularity, depict a rapidly unraveling psyche. Indeed, unraveling skeins of thread are the dominant motif of The Survival of the Avant-Garde (1985), which reduces the human figure to just a skull, genitalia and a mess of coloured threads.

At the core of Kudo's contemporary appeal is this explosive sense of disorder and disintegration. But for all the grim and often unexpected humour of his work – penises sprout from plants and a loose collection of eyeballs rattle around at the bottom of a pail – the work arises out of a firmly considered political and ideological position.

Kudo's early work is often explicitly political, staging itself in response to Western capitalism and in particular the American post-war occupation of Japan – Philosophy of Impotence (1961) was made in direct response to the 1960 signing of the United States Japan Security Treaty. His later work is perhaps less obviously ideological, but it retains (and also transforms) some of the same themes of occupation, resistance and control.

In this current exhibition, these key ideas are applied to the relentless paradoxes of sexual drive. On one level, Kudo presents human sexuality as a matter of all-consuming drive – senseless, tormented, and essentially removed from the self. But what is crucial here are the two primary settings that occupy Kudo's sculpture, and through which he considers the quandary of sexual drive: the garden and the cage. These are both symbols of the domestication of the natural, and the degree to which the resulting sculptures are at once rampant and contained suggests a confrontation between drive and its social suppression. Ultimately, both drive and the fabric of the life it disrupts are irrevocably compromised; the consideration of that mutual state of uneasy concession is what makes Kudo's work cohere beyond pure drive, in a realm of complex emotion.

Katie Kitamura

ARTFORUM
NOVEMBER 2008 INTERNATIONAL

NEW YORK

Tetsumi Kudo

ANDREA ROSEN GALLERY

This tantalizing introduction to the work of Tetsumi Kudo, via twenty five of his wildly idiosyncratic and often strenuously lurid multimedia sculptures, constituted the first gallery show in the United States devoted to the late Japanese artist. It was also intended to do some advance work for his major retrospective, which opened last month at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, by demonstrating that Kudo little known beyond his native country and his adopted home of France, where he lived from the early 1960s until the late 1980s-was, as the Rosen show's essayist and curator Joshua Mack hails him, "a significant precursor to much at the core of contemporary aesthetics." The selection did confirm a range of motifs and concerns around interpenetra ing states of physical and emotional turmoil that locate Kudo among the predecessors of contemporary abject expressionism, from Paul McCarthy (who recently included Kudo in a show detailing his own artistic influences) to Jake and Dinos Chapman to David Altmejd. But it also demonstrated intriguing departures from such straightforward historical vectors.

For Kudo-who grew up amid the destruction of World War II" bodies" and their processes, whether conceived of as human or something more broadly terrestrial, were sites of damage and deformation and the loci of struggles for political, technological, and symbolic control. One of the first projects to garner the artist attention was a 1962 installation titled *Philosophy of Impotence*, the second of two so named, in which he filled a gallery at Tokyo's Metropolitan Museum of Art with an array of black, penis-shaped objects, partly as a response to America's continued military and cultural presence in postwar Japan.

Phalli appeared in force at Rosen as well, popping up everywhere in a gallery set as a cold garden of unearthly delights-these and other sculpted bits of human anatomy (which the artist referred to as "souvenirs") populated an array of flower beds, birdcages, and terrariumlike vitrines, often paired with unexpected found objects and arrangements of mutant flora. Kudo's phalli are restrained with chains atop a mound of dirt in *Human Bonsai-Freedom of Deformity Deformity of Freedom*, 1979, while in *Cultivation of Nature* and *People Who are Looking at It*, 1971, they share space in a soil-filled plastic sphere with snail shells, giving the work the appearance of a grade-school biology project hijacked by Paul Thek. One also appears in the showstopping *Survival of the Avant-Garde*, 1985, as a human figure represented by a skull, a pair of hands, and silhouetting skeins of brightly colored string (think textile-arts version ofTom Friedman's self-portrait as exploded construction paper cadaver) reaches for his escaping manhood like a desert wanderer grasping at a glass of water. Taken together with the often blunt contents of the cage sculpturesespecially in later pieces like *Portrait of an Artist in Crisis*, 1980-81, where hands daub a pile of feces with a gaily colored brush-the works suggest the psychological battles Kudo was fighting both without and increasingly within himself, feeling both his own identity and the larger social environment fraught with ruptures, atomized, losing integrity.

Given the dark psychosocial landscape of most of Kudo's work, it's all the more poignant that in the years before his death in 1990 at the age of fifty-five, he turned increasingly away from garish figurative elements and toward more contemplative works, many made of lengths of string coiled around geometric forms. These late works are at once the simplest and the richest on view, and include the tightly wrapped tower of multicolored thread On the Structure ofthe Japanese System-*The Black Hole*, 1982, and *That Which Appeared Vertically in the Opposite Direction of Will*, 1984, a column encased in string and crystalline clumps of glue topped with a calligraphy brush, all rising out of a Japanese lacquer dish: a kind of memorial to a life held together with the materials and methods of an artist, despite the odds.

-Jeffrey Kastner

Tetsumi Kudo, Tokyo-Paris axe magnetique et axe vide (Tokyo-Paris Magnetic Axis and Empty Axis) 1982-83, mixed media, 15 x 26 x 14 ".

Art in Review

ADAGP, PARIS, AND ARS, NEW YORK; COURTESY OF ANDREA ROSEN GALLERY

"Pollution-Cultivation-New-Ecology Underground", a 1972-73 work by Tetsumi Kudo, a Japaneese artist who died in 1990

Tetsumi Kudo

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525 West 24th Street, Chelsea
Through Aug. 15

In terms of art, ours is a golden age of rediscovery. The past only gets bigger — and mostly better. The latest addition, at least for Americans, is the Japanese artist Tetsumi Kudo, who was born in Osaka in 1935, relocated to Paris in the early 1960s and lived there for 25 years. He returned to Japan in the late 1980s and died of cancer in Tokyo in 1990.

Mr. Kudo's first in-depth exposure in the United States is an exhibition of 26 derisively beautiful, macabre works whose hybrid forms often blend human body parts with plants and flowers. They range from the mid-1960s to the late '80s, with a concentration on the 1970s. The show has been organized with Joshua Mack, a writer and collector, just in time for the Kudo retrospective scheduled to open at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis in September. (His work was included in "Japanese Art After 1945" at the Guggenheim in New York and also in "Out of Actions" at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles in 1998.)

Mr. Kudo's sculptures and reliefs are not unfamiliar. They fit into a neo-Dada tradition that includes Jasper Johns, Daniel Spoerri, Yayoi Kusama, Lucas Samaras and Paul Thek. They update Surrealism (and Joseph Cornell) with the psychedelic colors of hippies and Pop.

These works represent a determinedly phallocentric world-view, in which anatomically precise penises, which you often don't see at first, are grafted on to plants or creep up them like caterpillars. Phalluses are chained to the ground, like little prisoners of war, in a small sculpture titled "Human Bonsai — Freedom of Deformity — Deformity of Freedom" (1979), and masquerade as a chorus of yellow and blue mutant parakeets in the yellow birdcage in "Your Portrait" (1965-66).

They mingle with cactuses and snails in the little terrarium titled "Cultivation of Nature and People Who Are Looking at It." In "Pollution — Cultivation — New-Ecology Underground" (1972-73), a relatively large phallic monument overlooks a miniature city visible inside a bermlike chunk of mud planted with bright but disheveled flowers.

Mr. Kudo could be equally scathing using skeletal hands and skull-like heads that evoke the grotesque hermits and gnomes of Japanese folklore. The green birdcage of "Portrait of an Artist in Crisis" holds a shattered face and a pair of spidery hands wielding a paint brush to apply color to a small pile of excrement. And his "Survival of the Avant-Garde" (1985) is a plastic skull whose body has decayed to a swirl of brightly colored thread, which became Mr. Kudo's preferred material toward the end of his life.

The figure could also be the melted victim of an atomic bomb. The ebullient bitterness of Mr. Kudo's work has many sources, including the American bombing of Japan during World War II and the occupation that followed. He looked at his country and found it wanting, but he also knew that the West was not much better off.

ROBERTA SMITH

"Box." Originally published in Kudo, exh. cat. (Paris: Galerie Beaubourg, Galerie Vallois, 1977).

We cannot live without "boxes." We are born from a box (womb), live our lives in a box (apartment), and after death we end up in a box (coffin).

In substance, we ourselves make, from birth until death, little boxes—that is, we make boxes inside a box. These little boxes are those that seal our prayers (wishes) and curses.

Here is a box with many interstices that is called a "cage." The purpose of this cage is not only to raise canaries but also to raise artists. The artists are left there, living admired and cherished like prostitutes behind a window, fish in an aquarium.

I display for you today a hell-cage the title of which is *Portrait of the Artist in Crisis*. While many artists dream of the sky (utopia), this artist turns toward hell, even crossing its threshold. In this infernal cage, he manufactures little boxes in which he seals his prayers without hope and his curses without aim. But these little boxes manufactured this way by the artist are not cubic; they sometimes have the shape of knitwork, or the shape of a turd, or the shape of a stretched string—that is to say, there is a box in a stretched string. This string is hermetically sealed! And this string hermetically seals up prayers and curses. Perhaps you will find, in the relationships between "cage," "artist," and "string," fundamental variations on the meaning of the box.

Perhaps my conceptual method is too Oriental. It is true that I still have to think about all this. ※

ARTFORUM

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JAPAN

When I returned to Tokyo in 1959 from my first trip through Europe and America, I was surprised to find a new, bizarre group of young artists, mostly in their twenties, called the *Neo-Dada Organizers*. They exhibited primarily in the *Yomiuri Independent Show*, the Japanese equivalent to France's *Salon de Refuses*. *The Neo-Dada Organizers* could be considered an updated version of the older *Gutai* group, who produced its first Happenings in the '50s. The younger artists were characterized by a disenchantment with the Abstract Expressionism which had so tremendously influenced the Japanese art world: for them, it was too esthetic. They desired an art which could respond more directly (though somewhat anarchistically) to the chaotic realities of the world they knew.

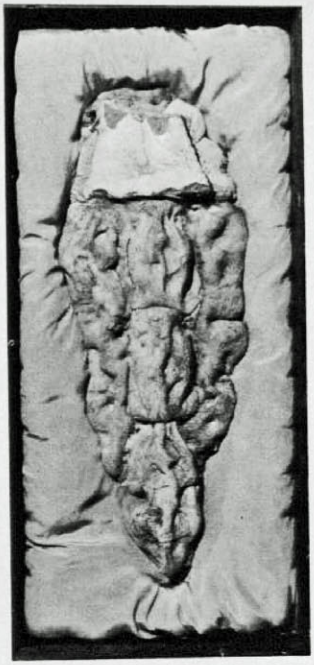
Their exhibits reflected the immense junk-yard of the teeming city of Tokyo. The junk which they first saw, which influenced their way of feeling objects, was the junk of the burned ruins of the city during the war. The blasted city had been their playground: their first toys had been bottles melted into distortion from fire bombs, pieces of roof-beams found in the ashes. Now, their shows were full of these junk-flowers, with their queer blossoms: broken whiskey or beer bottles, rusted drums, old sticks of bamboo, scraps of weather-beaten wood.

So we should consider the *Neo-Dada Organizers* exhibitions more as sociological than as artistic phenomena. Their demonstrations and Happenings on the streets were also more social (and sometimes political) than artistic. In political demonstrations, they would wrap themselves in bandages and weave through, or lie down in the streets of Tokyo. They participated actively in the famous demonstrations against the Japanese-American Security Treaty in 1960, mixing up slogans of "Down with AMPO!" (the Security Treaty) with "Down with AMFO!" (*Informel* painting). A persistent legend has it that it was one of their members, Arakawa, who threw the brick at the police trooper which triggered off the bloodiest of the riots.

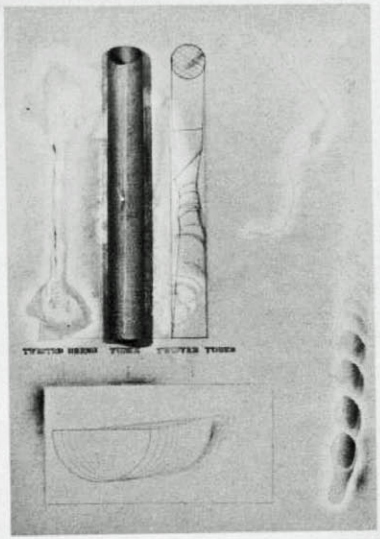
The art activity of the group was thus somewhat compromised by the social heat of its members. Because of this, the group was like a bomb, bursting with great force, but lacking the force to sustain itself. Though it disbanded in 1962, I would, nevertheless, like to attempt to estimate the activities of this group as the first important turning-point of post-war Japanese art. The subject can best be approached, perhaps, by examining the work of three "phoenixes" who have arisen from the ashes of the movement—Shusaku Arakawa, Tomio Miki, and Tetsumi Kudo.

Arakawa signalled his primary concerns with an event which he staged in the spring of 1960, a kind of anti-Happening (because nothing happened). As a feature of the Art Festival in a Tokyo college, Arakawa situated a large audience in a balcony which could only be reached via stepladders. With the audience "trapped" in the balcony, Arakawa then removed the stepladders and lay prostrate in the middle of the lower floor, motionless and without a sound, in complete darkness. He lay there for over an hour while the audience (including me) waited for something to happen; we were left in a great void, with the empty feeling of fear of the dark in the pits of our stomachs. Something of Arakawa's own fear of death and nothingness communicated itself to us. Finally, in desperation, in outrage, in fear, the audience began to jump down from the balcony, and found the "corpse" of Arakawa lying on the floor, which we began to kick and pummel. Arakawa withstood this treatment to the end, without a single reaction. For him, this "anti-Happening" was a laboratory experiment in which he was able to convert himself into a "thing," confronted with his fear of nothingness and the void.

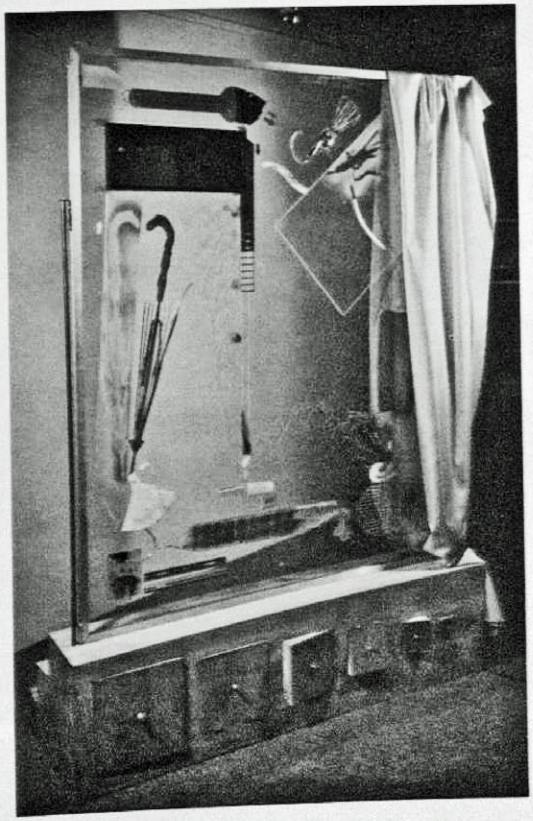
The series of *Boxes* that Arakawa was making at the same time can be regarded as incarnations of this same fear. These black boxes were like huge coffins which the viewer, like ancient tomb-robbers, had to open by himself. Inside were spread quilts of morbid colors on which congealed masses of cement and cotton matting lay interred, like masses of an expelled, dead foetus. Arakawa might have been a symbolic surgeon, cutting and extracting the



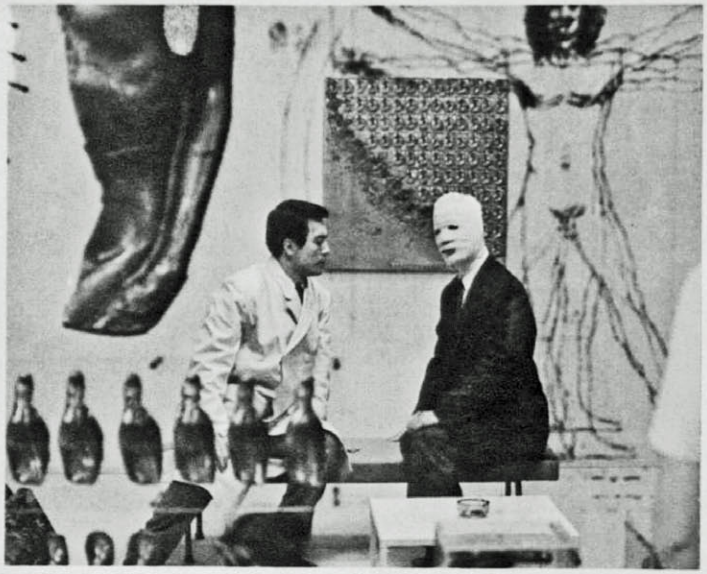
Shusaku Arakawa, *Box*, 1961.

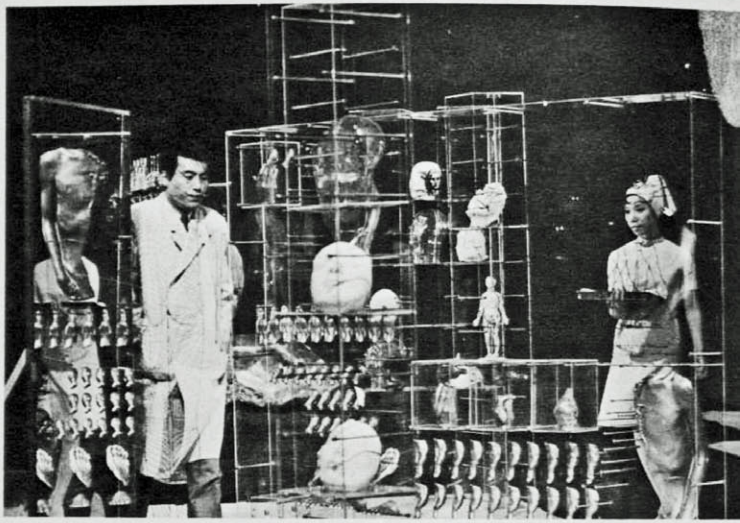


Shusaku Arakawa, *Diagram*, 1963. (Minami Gallery.)

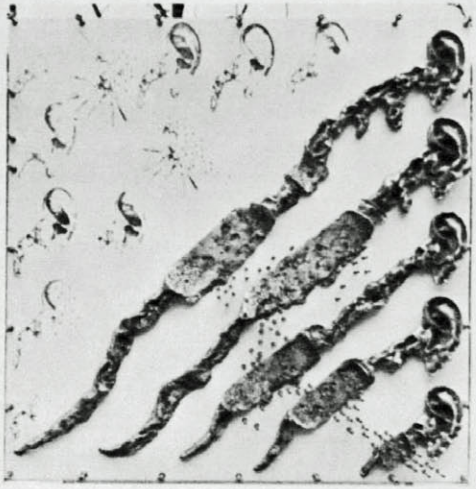


Shusaku Arakawa, *Diagram with Details of Marcel Duchamp*, 1965.

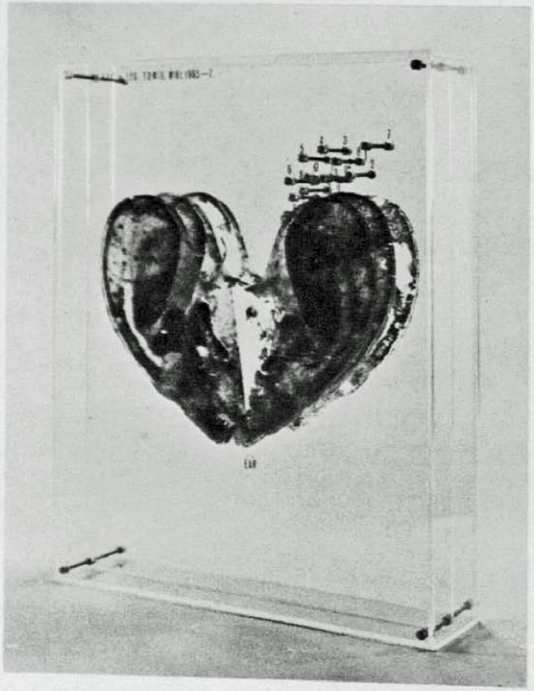




Tomio Miki, set for Tesigahara's film, *Another's Face*, 1966.



Tomio Miki, *Ear with Cane*, m/m, 1964. (Minami Gallery, Tokyo)



Tomio Miki, *Ear* #120, 1965.

Tomio Miki, *Ear*, 1964. (Minami Gallery)

hidden "cancers" proliferating beneath commonplace surfaces. In a sense, his obsession with death and nothingness distills the sensibility of the post-Hiroshima generation.

Arakawa has worked in New York since 1961; curiously, America gave him back the canvas to paint on. Since 1963, his various exhibitions in America and Europe have all been of the *Diagrams*, in which the silhouetted outlines of feathers, footprints, combs, tennis rackets, umbrellas, egg beaters, etc., have been transferred with an airbrush onto the canvas. We are thus allowed to confront only the "visible concept" of the objects, no more: on the white stage, the drama of metamorphosis enacts itself silently. In his January, 1966 exhibition (at the Dwan Gallery in New York), Arakawa pushed this concept of "conceptuality" to a logical limit, replacing the outlined silhouettes with a series of written words: BEDROOM, TUBE, AIR, SMELL. "I am attempting," he has said, "to pictorialize the state before the imagination begins to work," i.e., the pre-image state of painting. His work is a kind of "pregnant vacuum" out of which a number of possible pictures can spring into existence, a "pre-painting," corresponding roughly to Maurice Blanchot's observation, "Thought is the possibility of being in contact with things while withdrawing oneself from them to an infinite distance."

Tomio Miki, another member of the *Neo-Dada Organizers*, exhibited his "destroyed paintings" in 1958 at the *Yomiuri Independent Show*. Here, he splashed gasoline over his abstract paintings and set a match to them; the audience attended the rite of destruction of *Art Informel*. In 1960 he showed huge junk-sculpture pieces, constructed of auto headlights, or reliefs of row upon row of whiskey bottles. Since 1962, however, his series of *Ears* is what has brought his work to the attention of a larger audience. The first was a huge *Human Ear*, cast in aluminum, which he exhibited in a show called *Young Seven* at the Minami Gallery. Afterwards, he gave himself over to a range of variations on the theme. Some are actual size, first shaped in clay, then molded in rubber, finally cast in gleaming aluminum. Sometimes the ear presents a lobe stretched like a stick or a phallus; others might have several spoons placed idiosyncratically in the body of the ear. Later, he printed the image of the ear (by silk-screen process) on transparent plastic boards, stacking them so that the viewer peers into an infinity of duplicated ears. This method is also employed in Miki's sets for Hiroshi Teshigahara's new film, *Another's Face*.

Miki's own remarks on his current preoccupation are interesting:

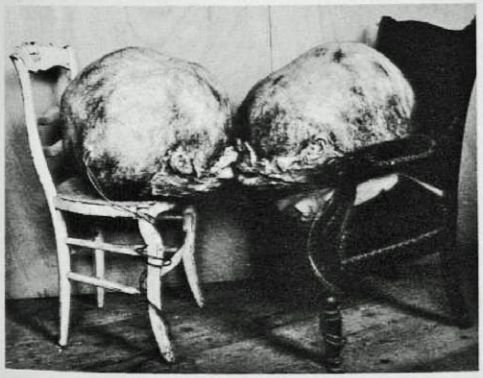
> In Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea*, Monsieur Roquentin suddenly vomits against the existence of the roots of a tree. I had a similar experience in a train, when, for no reason, I suddenly felt myself surrounded by hundreds of ears trying to assault me. This personal episode, however, wouldn't be any precise answer to why I make ears. I can hardly say I chose the ear. More precisely, isn't it that the ear chose me?

Tetsumi Kudo, who has been living in Paris since 1962, works with the themes of sex and impotence. His earlier work, around 1958, turned on heavily dripped paintings, teeming with biological scratches, like germ-microbes. *Limitless Propagation* is a typical title for the object-sculptures which followed this microbic painting series. In the *Yomiuri Independent Show* of 1962 he displayed for the first time the now-famous *Philosophy of Impotence*, lined up around an entire room. From the ceiling, cords hung down in great profusion, attached with electric bulbs and slices of bread, all painted a coal-tar black. Called "a morgue of phalluses," the room caused a considerable scandal, on the heels of which Kudo left for Paris.

Curiously, as Arakawa left his boxes in Japan, Kudo began to build boxes in Paris. But Kudo's boxes are not pseudo-religiously ritualistic like Arakawa's, but are raucous, wildly blasting jukeboxes of sensual images. Closed, the boxes look like dice, with dots on the sides. Opened, sirens begin to wail, huge eyeballs peer out, open mouths gape, sets of injection needles, condoms, roulette-wheels, rest fitfully, or rows of rubber dolls, compressed hideously in jars, confront the viewer. All the boxes are entitled, *Your Portrait*. Another piece, called *L'Amour*, confronts two monstrous heads, each on the seat of a chair, close enough for the two sets of rotten lips to touch; a telegraph key buried inside spells out *Je vous aime* in Morse code.

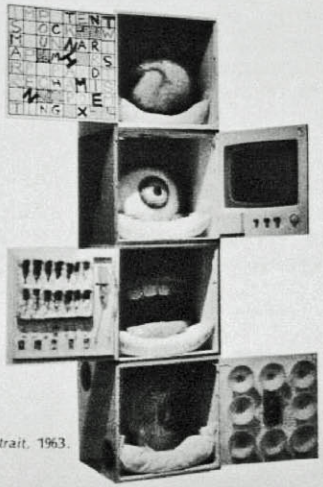
The strength of Kudo's images turns on the fact that their violence and hatred is directed as well at himself as at the stagnant, petit-bourgeois Parisian society he inhabits. He does not purify or abstract his rage and fear, but displays it as much as an aspect of himself as of those to whom the vicious title, *Your Portrait*, is directed. ■

— YOSHIAKI TONO

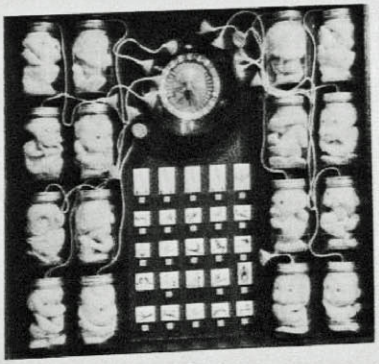


Tetsumi Kudo, *L'Amour*, 1964.

Tetsumi Kudo, *Limitless Propagation*, 1962.



Tetsumi Kudo, *Your Portrait*, 1963.



Tetsumi Kudo, *Your Portrait - A*, 1962.

KUDO

"Dear Mr. Beeren (Dear Europeans)." Originally published in Kudo, exh. cat. (Amsterdam: Galerie 20, 1966).

W.A.L. Beeren (1928 - 2000) was the Director of the Stedeljijk Museum, Amsterdam (1985-1992) and the Director of the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam (1978-1985). He was also an art critic, lecturer and curator of the Gemeentemuseum; chief curator of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam; and art history lecturer at the University of Groningen.

Dear Kudo:

What does 'Your Portrait 1963' mean? Am I right in assuming that the boxes attempt to deceive us, but that the only thing the big eye is watching is the television set; the mouth gulps down food like pills, the ear listens only to the transistor. The realistic head with its pink skin and black hair only uses its enormous brain-space to solve a crossword puzzle, the keyword of which is SEX.

What is it about these images that moves us? Is it the ironic representation of man? (It is more like an oversimplified cartoon than a psychological representation). What is your concern, what is the essence of your philosophy? It is form. If you choose to look at man in this way, well then it is your own business. If you mean 'present-day man,' speak for yourself, my good fellow. You are right in demonstrating the shock effect between the cube and its content... between cool destiny and the meaning of life. You are right when you exhibit this horrifying head. To me, it resembles the head of a tax official — or that of the husband of my former landlady. To be sure, a family portrait has never given me such an opportunity to satisfy my curiosity of the horrific. Throw your philosophy to the dogs: I am only interested in the peculiar head. Does it wear long pants?

Paris 1964: a visit to your studio.

At that time you tore away the rags from your window and the —15° frost fell on us. I could then see the weeping willow full of sadness, isolated by black plaster, with exhausted flash bulbs for testicles: 'Your Impotence 1961—62'!

Your images spoke then and still speak in an intelligible tongue. We Europeans, what did we talk about? About fascinating skin or a nude lying in the fruit basket next to the lemon and the peach? Or, too, about the she-monkey in Francis Bacon's closed room?

Hiroko never seemed more charming than when she — immensely enjoying the effect — opened the cheap white bag and showed me the entire collection of condomes filled with fixed plastic sperm, each sporting a little pink bow. A festive **bonbonnière** containing the pralines of our impotence. Atavisms of the Dutch Society for Sexual Reform. Where did her glory go? It's a bitter pill to swallow! 'Glaasje op, laat je rijden.'

Life shrivels up under your gaze. Impotence/babies nursed by an artificial mother. Impotence searching for an alibi in photos of athletes. Please try to understand: we still very much want to retain something of human **noblesse.** We should not like to forget the noble statues of the Chartres cathedral; there our Christian tradition is personified... the tradition of intelligence and charity (love). Even if Christ had not existed, there would still be the God we created in our own image. Thus, Western man wanted to be good, conscious, and self-denying. Is that not the supreme lesson of the Western world, Kudo? Why, then this talk of Hiroshima?

Paris, December 1965

There are those chairs you made recently. Human beings seem to be melting away in them: eyes, nose, hands all drifting away from the body — the rest, a kind of pool. But one hand still holds a mirror while the other holds a body-building magazine. Is it proper to see this only as an expression of autonomous art? I feel we have the right to ask: What is going on here? The phenomena move us too deeply, we cannot dismiss it with a passing glance. So we ask: What has happened? An atomic catastrophe with human bits and pieces left over? We are upset, for we experience this dissolution as an attack on our own existence. Should we enjoy watching ourselves being murdered?

I protest for the simple reason that you don't seem to regard the situation as incidental. For instance, here is a man melting from the intense heat of chemical weapons. Anyway, it is clear that we are no body-building heroes, no idealized figures of a medieval cathedral. But is this new 'type' the alternative? When compared to Chaplin's 'Charlie', the 'Louse' of Mayakofsky, or Wozzeck, this new situation is a humiliation — Grand Guignol on a Dantean level. When you try to simulate human skin and fix it in plastic, I think of corpses found on the moors. Do you again want to demonstrate that we have already ceased to exist... you did say that you recall events from a certain year.

Do you want to collect us like scalps? But why in such a clinical fashion? Don't be angry, but I cannot help thinking of the Nazis who made human-skin lampshades. Last question: When you put two heads, enormous and eyeless, on a chair,

that communicate only with their mouths, what is the meaning behind it? Is it true what science claims: that after a million years, the head will be the largest part of the body? But isn't that super-rational situation a contradiction of the decomposed human being you see at the same time? And where is our sex, Kudo? I thought that the more we live with our bodies, the more human we are. Our head is grand, granted, but sometimes it can be a fantastic sensation to lose it. Are you haunted by different visions or do you belong to that great group of artists that pretends to mean less than we think it does?
I put these questions to you because your images are so obvious, clear, and moving that a dialogue seems more natural than silence.

W. A. L. BEEREN

Dear Mr. Beeren (Dear Europeans):
Are you afraid to see yourself as you are? If so, then let me present you with 'Your Portrait.' It's ugly, awful, uneasy, and sometimes comical. But it's in a condition of metamorphosis — not despair at all. We are all in a state of metamorphosis — in a transitional stage — like the cicida shedding its skin or the maggot becoming a fly. It is not just a question of appearance. Religion, sex, philosophy, politics... everything is in a state of transformation. The body itself is changing, too. Still, it is difficult to see the situation of metamorphosis concretely. Therefore, we need a portrait that can translate that condition with concrete and symbolic elements. Thus, the decaying skin, the head, the eyeballs, the nose, and the ears separated from each other, appear as concrete and directive elements in the portrait. But you should not be concerned with these appearances. My main concern is 'observation.' I observe you, myself, and all other human beings the same way a doctor observes guinea-pigs. 'Human **noblesse?**' Let me herewith diagnose your disease as a kind of nostalgia. I do not want to deny you your Christian tradition, your human **noblesse,** because shock treatment can sometimes have disastrous effects. But, gradually, you should try to think of them as mere commodities — like stockings, ice cream, or instant coffee. They are as noble as Christian tradition and human **noblesse** — useful and convenient, too, aren't they? I can understand you Europeans creating God in your own image. But I think it's high time God was sold in the automats, neatly wrapped in small plastic bags. Anyway, your opinion is to me nothing more than a guinea-pig reaction. Please don't misunderstand me. I don't think of you **alone** as a guinea-pig — **all** people to me are as guinea-pigs to a doctor. Needless to say, there are infinite guinea pig-doctor relationships, and sometimes they change places. Hiroshima must have been tragic. But I don't think it can stand alone as **the** cruel act; there were many perpetrated by the Japanese, the Germans, the Americans, the Russians, and others. Hiroshima was just one of them. But at Hiroshima — at the flash of the atom bomb — 'white shadows' (former human beings) evaporated and fixed themselves on the walls in a split-second. In those shadows I sense a great meaning that transcends the tragedy of war. 'Melting human beings?' Your 'human **noblesse'**

is melting away and only the skin is left. But this is not 'murder' as you put it. It was not melted by chemical weapons. It is a necessary phenomenon; it begins to melt, it is molten, and it is reborn as a new transparent body (organism). Why are you so concerned with human **noblesse?** Do you long for the age of the maggot? The maggot, beautiful though it may be, is not a state to which one can return. If you are so concerned with humankind, then we can make room for you in the zoo or the Musée de l'Homme. It has to be done! When I exhibit human skins you think of 'corpses on the moors.' Indeed, they are corpses in that 'corpses' and my 'skins' are both objects, in the physical sense of the word. But they are skins you peel off. It doesn't mean, however, that they 'cease to exist,' but rather, it's a demonstration of the 'continuation to exist.' You say that it reminds of the Nazis who fashioned lampshades from human skins. I don't defend them, certainly. But it is necessary to explain clearly the difference between them and me. Their 'skins' were connected with love, hate, and fear of human beings. My skins have nothing to do with love or hate of human beings. I am indifferent to humanity. I look upon skins as I look upon fossils. If you like, we can put my skins in cages and hang them in your living-room for nostalgia's sake. Or, maybe, you'd prefer to occupy one of the cages yourself? A pretty canary you'd make, too.

'Two big heads?' Those two enormous heads, which expose electric circuits are sitting and talking 'love.' Their bodies are in a state of degeneration; only their heads seem to develop. They are kissing with their rotting mouths — no, their mouths are connected by electric contact parts. They say 'Je vous aime' in Morse code.

Those big heads are 'Your Portrait' of the present time, of now. It is not put too strongly. It is not science fiction but reality. For example, a car-driver's condition is certainly that of an electric circuit made up of a perception system, an instruction system, and a transmission system. This circuit, in turn, is connected with the car's mechanism. I think that a condition as a big circuit is sitting on the seat. Another example is when you are having sex; the voice, the caresses, the atmosphere, the smell, the heat, and the humidity... all of these convey a kind of signal to your body, a signal that achieves an effect. There's no doubt about it: your body is a mass of circuits at that time — that is, everything degenerates at that moment, except the big head that is a symbol of the electric circuit.

So those two big heads on the chair represent you — 'Your Portrait' as you are now. The dot-dash sounds of the Morse code prove the irony of love. It's misery, this 'human **noblesse'** that clings to the electric-circuit mass. Your penis? Search for it in the maze of electric circuits! Perhaps it is acting as a regulator at some intersection.

KUDO

Kaprow, Allan. Assemblage, Environments, and Happenings (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1966).

FOR EXORCISING THE SPIRIT OF CATASTROPHE

Performed at the Raymond Cordier Gallery in Paris, October 1962, and at the Boulogne Movie Studios in a different, extended and developed form, February 1963.

Environment of walls by Ferró, Kudo, Hiquely, Lebel, Lilian Lijn. Technical assistant, Alan Zion. Production by Titanus (MGM) Film (very corrupt, badly cut, poor commentary) later released under the title "Il Malamondo." Audience of about 120; length, an hour and a half.

Entrance of parade to jazz music. A large metal sculpture is beaten and broken. Two naked girls start large collage painting on wall. Lebel makes collage (with political headlines) on their bodies. They dance as they paint and glue, then they pass into international blood bath (bathtub full of chicken blood and water), put on masks of Kennedy and Krushchev (this was long before Dallas murder —no connection) and wash off headlines with blood, climb into hammock with third girl: sex.

Simultaneously, color slides of bodies and paintings are projected by Ferró onto the body of a woman's black silk underwear. Ferró afterwards paints a picture with electric drill, phallus sticking out from pants, dipped into girl. Kudo as sex priest makes silent sermon with immense papier-mâché phallus, then screams in Japanese, caresses public with the phallus, goes into mystic orgasm and then collapses.

A large head (over nine feet high) cries poems; wood, books, photographs, finally the body of a girl drop out of right eye like tears. Lebel as TV man hallucinates in electronic language, waving yin–yang code flags. (Political propaganda in electronic code.) Cans of paint are thrown by public onto board twirled very fast by a motor, while a machine paints a fine stripe of red on it. Two plain-clothes policemen. They say nothing.

Jazz plays very fast, swinging stimulating sounds; a girl from the audience takes off her clothes and dances. Another one climbs into hammock with girl there. Lebel paints picture on transparent plastic and crashes it onto floor with girl. Ferró projects nudes onto public and onto belly of girl. Two men scream and kick photographer. Pot (marijuana) is sneaked into Cary Grant's dressing room behind set; Happening continues with improvisations for another thirty minutes until studio manager turns off lights. About twenty people follow cast and band into vast dressing rooms in basement. Orgy in showers. Everyone departs around 3 A.M.